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ABSTRACT

Parents of firstborn male and female infants completed questionnaires concerning their perceptions of their infants. One question focused on how important it was for their children to become either very masculine or very feminine. It was predicted that the less parents stressed the importance of gender appropriateness, the less they would view their children in a traditional sex-stereotyped fashion. This prediction held true only for fathers of girls. Mothers of girls actually showed a trend toward the opposite tendency, while mothers and fathers of boys revealed no distinct overall patterns. For fathers but not for mothers, ratings of the importance of their children's developing gender appropriateness, independence, and high achievement were significantly positively correlated. More research developing and refining the concept of parental cognitive commitment to the sex of the child was recommended. (Author/RH)

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PARENTAL COGNITIVE COMMITMENT TO THE SEX OF THE CHILD

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PARENTAL COGNITIVE COMMITMENT TO THE SEX OF THE CHILD

Parents of first-born male and female infants completed questionnaires concerning their perceptions of their infants. One question involved how important it was for their children to become very masculine or feminine. It was predicted that the less parents stressed the importance of gender appropriateness, the less they would view their children in a traditional sex-stereotyped fashion. However, this held true only for fathers of girls. Mothers of girls actually showed a trend toward the opposite tendency. Mothers and fathers of boys revealed no distinct overall patterns. Ratings of the importance of their children developing gender appropriateness, of becoming independent, and of achieving a lot, were all significantly positively correlated for fathers, but not for mothers. More research was urged into developing and refining the concept of parental cognitive commitment to the sex of the child.

PARENTAL COGNITIVE COMMITMENT TO THE SEX OF THE CHILD

There is very little argument over the finding that males and females are perceived differently.[16] Sex differences are presumed to exist by subjects even when the individuals being perceived are as young as one day old,[11] and when the perceivers themselves are as young as 3-5 years old.[5] These results are especially interesting given the rather objective evidence that sex differences are either weak or non-existent in the infant.[1,8,10] Furthermore, some studies have gone so far as to label an infant of indeterminate sex as a boy for half of the subjects, and as a girl for the other half. Results consistently show that subjects perceive the infants differently according to the labeled sex, and in line with typical sex stereotypes.[2,4,6,9,12,13,14,15]

However, relatively few studies have used parents for their subjects, as opposed to college students, and even fewer have had the parents judging their own infants, as opposed to infants of indeterminate sex. It has been proposed (although this proposal has never been tested empirically) that one variable which might affect parental sex-typing of their infants is the parental cognitive commitment to the sex of the child.[3] This may manifest itself in the degree to which the parents sex-type their children in order to ensure that others clearly recognize whether their child is a boy or a girl. If this "cognitive commitment" can somehow be tapped, then it is

predicted that the greater the commitment, the more the parents will perceive their children in a sex-typed fashion.

METHOD

The subjects for this study were 16 parents of boys and 13 parents of girls. Their children ranged in age from 20 to 37 weeks old, and were all first-borns. The parents, who had participated in prenatal classes at a suburban Washington, D.C. hospital, were contacted by their class teacher to obtain their consent for participating in this study. Parents were sent questionnaires through the mail which they were instructed to complete individually, rather than together. The questionnaire consisted of 18 bipolar adjectives (see TABLE 1), arranged on seven-point scales. Parents were instructed to circle the point on the scale which most closely represented their perception of their child for a given pair of adjectives. In addition, parents answered three questions concerning the importance of their child's becoming independent, achieving, and masculine or feminine. They responded to these questions by agreeing or disagreeing, again on a seven-point scale, concerning the importance of these issues.

TABLE 1 about here

RESULTS

The pivotal question for this study was the last one in which the parents of boys agreed or disagreed concerning how important it was for their sons to become very masculine, and parents of girls agreed or disagreed concerning how important it was for their daughters to become very feminine. The answers to these questions were correlated with their answers to all the other questions in order to determine if the cognitive commitment to the sex of the child was related to other perceptions made by the parents. These correlations are presented in TABLE 1, broken down into four categories based on sex of parent and sex of infant.

The first major pattern is that the cognitive commitment concept seems to work quite well for fathers of girls. The more the fathers downplayed the importance of their daughters becoming feminine, the more they saw their daughters as easy going, uncomplaining, masculine (or rather, less feminine), big, independent, and not easily scared. Even for the bipolar adjectives which did not approach significance, similar patterns revealed themselves; that is, fathers saw their daughters as more sturdy, outgoing, messy, active, calm, rough, and less cuddly. Each of these 13 characteristics goes <u>against</u> the traditional feminine stereotypes. Thus we can conclude that the less the fathers stressed their daughters' femininity, the less stereotypically they viewed their daughters.

In contrast with the fathers of girls, the mothers of girls seemed to show an opposite effect: the less the mothers

stressed their daughters' femininity, the more stereotypically they viewed their daughters. To be specific, as they downplayed the importance of femininity, they saw their daughters as significantly more shy and more cautious, and as insignificantly more unaggressive, more fussy, quieter, more whiny, more inactive, and more dependent. On the other hand, they also saw their daughters as significantly calmer and insignificantly less feminine, both of which oppose the feminine stereotype. Thus the results for mothers of girls are not as clear-cut as for fathers of girls; nevertheless, these two categories are clearly different from each other in their overall patterns.

Mothers and fathers of boys did not tend to reveal any distinct overall patterns. The only results worth noting for mothers of boys were again opposite to the direction predicted. That is, the more they downplayed the importance of their sons' masculinity, the more they saw their sons as outgoing, messy, and not easily scared, all masculine stereotypes. The only results worth noting for fathers of boys were that they saw their sons as insignificantly more sturdy and more fussy, the more they downplayed the importance of their sons' masculinity.

One other interesting pattern worth noting involves the questions concerning the importance of the children becoming independent and achieving. For mothers of girls and boys, no significant patterns emerged. However, for fathers of both boys and girls, the more they downplayed the importance of their sons' masculinity and their daughters' femininity, the more they also downplayed the importance of their children becoming independent and achieving. This held true especially

for their sons ($p<.01$ for both independence and achievement).

DISCUSSION

There are three major conclusions that can be drawn from the data. The first is that the importance of the femininity of daughters means something different to mothers than to fathers. As their daughters' femininity becomes less important to them, fathers tend to perceive them less stereotypically, whereas mothers tend to perceive them more stereotypically. This suggests that further research be carried out to determine the factors which constitute parental definitions of gender appropriateness of their daughters. It must also be determined what parents mean when they say appropriate sex-typing of their daughters is important or unimportant. One possible interpretation is that mothers whose daughters seem to be developing in sex-appropriate fashion are not threatened, and can thus "afford" to say that it is not so important that their daughters become very feminine. Mothers whose daughters seem to be developing non-traditionally might be threatened by this, thus leading to their accentuation of the importance of their daughters becoming feminine. On the other hand, fathers who downplay the importance of their daughters' femininity might indeed perceive them more androgynously, whereas fathers who emphasize femininity might perceive their daughters as more feminine. Thus cause and effect might work in different

directions for mothers and fathers. For mothers, perceptions might affect the importance with which they view their daughters' femininity, whereas for fathers the importance dimension might affect their perceptions. A subsidiary question concerns the reasons why sons were not seen in any consistent way by their parents with respect to the importance of their masculinity.

A second major conclusion revolves around the positive correlations between the fathers' rated importance of their childrens' masculinity/femininity, achieving, and independence. Perhaps this reflects an overall moderating or lessening of expectations. When fathers expect certain things of their children, this may reflect an overall tendency to label and pigeonhole. When fathers downplay their expectations in one area, this predicts to the downplaying of expectations in other areas, as well. Of course, this conclusion raises several more qurstions. First, why does this hold more for sons than for daughters? And second, why does this hold for fathers and not for mothers?

The final conclusion is rather obvious: much more research must go into developing and refining the concept of parental cognitive commitment to the sex of the child. It might also be of interest to pursue the idea suggested by Lewis & Weinraub that a child might develop different degrees of cognitive commitment to his or her own gender. Perhaps a series of questions (rather than merely the one question used in the present study) can be developed which will produce a more differentiated score on a cognitive commitment scale. Moreover, what this cognitive commitment means to the parents (or to a

child) must be fleshed out, perhaps through semantic differential techniques. Thus the present study appears to have raised far more questions than it has answered.

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TABLE 1

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE RATED IMPORTANCE OF MASCULINITY/FEMININITY AND THE PARENTAL RATINGS FOR THE 18 BIPOLAR ADJECTIVES AND TWO IMPORTANCE ITEMS

Bipolar Adjectives	Mothers of Girls	Mothers of Boys	Fathers of Girls	Fathers of Boys
Delicate-Sturdy	.19	.07	.17	.40*
Aggressive-Unaggressive	.30	-.08	.05	.11
Shy-Outgoing	-.61**	.41*	.36	-.11
Fussy-Easy Going	-.34	-.01	.41*	-.41*
Quiet-Noisy	-.33	-.28	.00	.12
Messy-Neat	.18	-.43**	-.25	.16
Firm-Soft	-.17	-.13	.01	-.02
Whiny-Uncomplaining	-.23	.16	.45*	-.19
Active-Inactive	.38*	-.22	.23	.08
Masculine-Feminine	-.40*	.29	-.44*	-.21
Cuddly-Not Cuddly	.12	-.04	.32	.05
Big-Little	-.22	.04	-.54**	-.19
Dependent-Independent	-.33	.06	-.52**	-.23
Excitable-Calm	.50**	.18	.25	.06
Gentle-Rough	-.12	-.08	.21	-.19
Daring-Cautious	.54**	.21	-.09	-.27
Stubborn-Not Stubborn	-.08	-.02	-.08	-.24
Easily-Not Easily Scared	-.06	.37*	.76**	-.07
Importance Items				
Importance of Independence	-.22	-.14	.46*	.64**
Importance of Achievement	.24	.28	.49**	.77**

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$

NOTE- A positive correlation implies that as the parents' rated importance of the child's masculinity/femininity goes down, the child is perceived as being closer to the right-hand item of the bipolar adjective pair. For the importance items, a positive correlation implies that as the importance of masculinity/femininity declines, so does the rated importance of becoming independent or achieving.